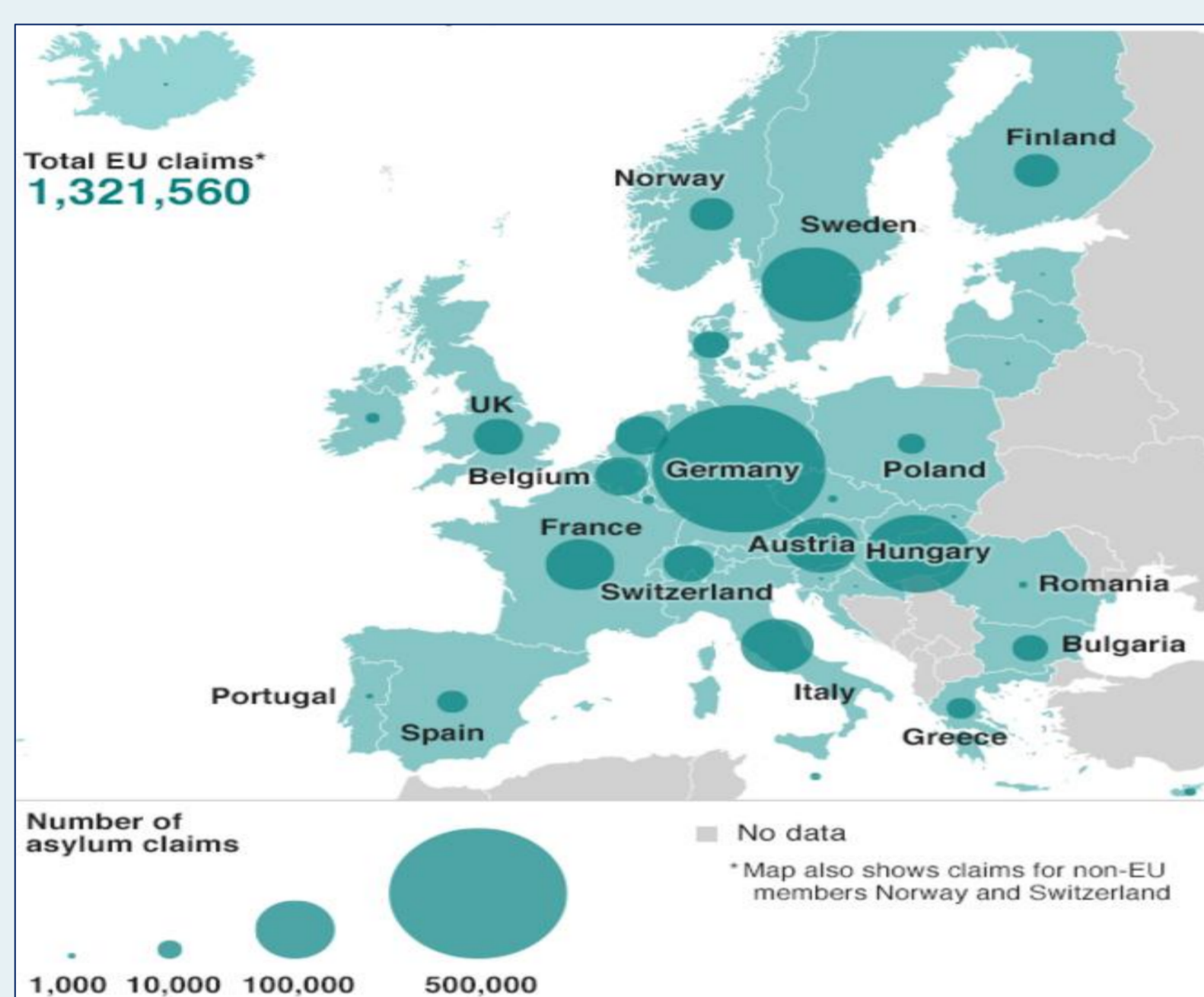


Understanding Europe Through its Migrants: An Interpretation of 'Europe' During the Migrant Crisis

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In 2015, the European Union (EU) was faced with close to 1.3 million asylum claims in 2015 (European Commission, 2016). This vast increase in applications came to be described as a 'migrant crisis', not just in humanitarian terms, but as a test to 'Europe' as an identity. This research sought to understand how the responses of EU-states towards the migrant crisis (re)affirmed 'Europe', both as an identity and as a means of legitimacy in determining policy. This conceptualisation was achieved by analysing common features of language that have been used by European leaders, researchers and media to interpret, respond and justify responses to the migrant crisis.



Asylum Claims in Europe, 2015. Image Source - http://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php/Asylum_quarterly_report

Citizenship and Crisis

The research examined changes in domestic citizenship law during the crisis, interpreting how they could (re)affirm an identity of 'Europe'. In particular, I examined two acts of legislation: the ban on full-faced veils in Austria, and the 'Jewellery Law' in Denmark, which legislated that asylum seekers would have to give up any jewellery worth over 10,000 kroner (£1,200) to fund Danish welfare provisions.



Pro-ban protestors in Austria.
Image Source - <https://ifoesterreich.at/>

What I found was that changes in legislation required good migrant/bad migrant distinctions (Kuisma, 2013) for 'Europe' to filter those it saw as/as not European. What legitimised these distinctions were discourses of nationalism, which came into play alongside a rise in far-right parties across the EU. These parties contributed to embedding the idea that "non-native elements are fundamentally threatening to the homogenous nation-state" (Mudde, 2007: 19). This led me to a paradoxical conclusion, that the ideas of 'Europe' as a supra-national, non-nationalist entity are embodied by discourses of nationalism to (re)affirm 'Europe', as belonging to select group of people, the 'natives'. In this discourse, the policies to deny migrants access become legitimate.

Security and the 'Crisis'

My research also analysed how measures of security throughout the crisis became legitimate in the name of 'Europe'. Examples of security measures include Hungary building a 175km fence along its southern border to "defend Christian Europe against invading Muslims" (Zizek, 2016: 68), or the normalisation of "states of emergency" legislation across 10 EU member states throughout the event (Amnesty International, 2017). What I found was that key words such as 'crisis', in conjunction with discourses of the migrant as a 'suspect' or 'risk' legitimised acts of governance. In these acts of governance, 'Europe' is placed in opposition to the migrant.



Security Responses: Hungary's 175km fence along its southern border. Image source - <https://sputniknews.com/europe/201509171027141497-hungary-game-of-thrones-migrants-crisis/>

In the discourse, migrants were identified as actors of material concepts of violence, such as terrorism. I argue that this understanding of violence not only allowed for broad associations of migrants to be understood as 'threats', but to distance 'Europe' from ever being considered violent. Conversely, I argue that 'Europe' can be understood as violent. By defining the realms for discourse, 'Europe' can be interpreted as 'symbolically violent', defined as "violence due to language itself, for language allows the imposition of a standard by which some events appear 'violent'" (Zizek, 2008:55). Defining the boundaries of violence, 'Europe' becomes not only violent, but ideological, for it prescribes a set of opinions and beliefs that characterise a society (Zizek, 2008:31). In the context of the migrant 'crisis', the ability of 'Europe' to determine discourse that legitimise the security state is an ideological/non-neutral force, arguably the most violent position of all.

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